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SUBJECT: BELGIUM: CLOSER COORDINATION WITH U.S. AND OTHER
DONORS SOUGHT BY MFA'S INCOMING AFRICA DIRECTOR

Classified By: R. Kiene for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1. (C) Summary: In an August 5 meeting with Charge and Embassy political officers, the new Director of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Department for Sub-Saharan Africa sought greater coordination and cooperation among donor countries active in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). He expressed continued interest in the idea of a dialogue between Belgian and U.S. Africa experts discussed by former Foreign Minister De Gucht and Secretary Clinton in February. The new Foreign Minister, Yves Leterme, wants to normalize relations that had been strained under the outspoken De Gucht. The MFA plans to prepare a fresh strategy for the DRC and present it for approval to contact group partners in late September or October. Belgium supports greater attention to the fundamentals of security sector reform and a firm approach to cancellation of the DRC's debts. Nijskens would be open to a mechanism like the Kimberly process for illegal exploitation of minerals in the Eastern Congo, though he recognizes that there are technical obstacles to tracing the origin of some exports. Nijskens said that Belgium no longer has any significant economic interests in the DRC, other than an active air link to Kinshasa. What investments there are are small and in non-strategic sectors. Nevertheless, he said, the Congo is important to Belgium because of the extensive family ties and the estimated 50,000 immigrants from the Congo living in Belgium. Nijskens welcomes Chinese investment in the DRC, but says the Chinese should not assume their business methods work best. They are slowly learning, he said, that payments under the table do not ensure long-term benefits. Nijskens said that Belgium is sending a ship to join the EU's anti-piracy operation off Somalia, and advocates a more active presence by the West there. Belgium is also interested in becoming more active in Sudan. The Belgian Embassy in Zimbabwe is closed, but Belgian officials recently met with Morgan Tsvangirai. The GOB would like to assist in humanitarian efforts in Zimbabwe, but only through channels that do not benefit the hardliners in Mugabe's camp. Nijskens said the GOB is less critical of Burundi's government than it is of the DRC's, but he recommends attention to some politicians' efforts to destabilize the peace in that country. He is carefully watching the human rights situation in Rwanda, even as that country makes progress socially and economically. End Summary.

2. (C) On August 5, Charge and Poloffs discussed Africa issues with the MFA's incoming Belgian Director for Sub-Saharan Africa, Reiner Nijskens, and its Central Africa desk officer, Hughes Chantry. Nijskens said that he was heartened by President Obama's speech in Accra, Ghana, and

welcomes all opportunities to work more closely with the U.S. on all Africa issues. On a personal level, he looks forward to renewing a long standing friendship with Howard Wolpe who he met when they were Great Lakes Envoys for the U.S. and Belgium. He acknowledged the U.S.-Belgian relationship has come a long way since its low point during the invasion of Iraq. He highlighted closer military to military cooperation by noting that several Belgian suggestions were included in Africom's memorandum of understanding with the DRC.

United to help DRC

13. (C) Nijskens said that the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is Belgium's first priority in Africa. Despite the change in Foreign Minister (FM) from Karel De Gucht to Yves Leterme, there will be no change in the substance of Belgium's approach, he said. He stated that Belgium is still interested in the exchange of views among U.S. and Belgian Africa experts that was discussed by FM De Gucht and Secretary Clinton in February. In a meeting with the Government of the DRC on August 4, FM Leterme was careful to emphasize that relations between DRC and Belgium will be normalized "within stated positions and principles." Nijskens cautioned that it is important to have stronger coordination between donor countries and not allow the Congolese to divide and conquer as they have done in the past. He expects the Congolese to become more difficult to deal with as nationalist sentiment is stoked by politicians in the run up to the DRC's elections in 2011. He cited Afghanistan as a possible model for coordination of assistance. He said the GOB will complete a strategy around

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mid-September, then share it with privileged partners, such as the U.S.

14. (C) A key goal of the GOB is getting the DRC back to security fundamentals and good governance. Specifically, he sees a need to keep the DRC army out of the mining industry, as this appears to be an enabler for the current cycle of hardship. He supports efforts for a Kimberly-like process to help stem illegal mineral extraction. Despite a lack of information, the task force on illegal exploitation of natural resources in the Great Lakes Region aims to put forward some concrete steps in capacity building for eastern DRC. He said that ensuring that illegal exploitation does not occur and providing traceability is challenging, having resulted in Belgian companies pulling out of the area entirely.

15. (C) Nijskens believes that the U.S. and Belgium are correctly taking a tougher stance than France and the UK on debt relief for the DRC, because if not, the same problems are going to quickly recur.

Rest of Africa

16. (C) Burundi received a less critical review from Nijskens, but the GOB remains vigilant concerning the possibility of violence in the upcoming elections. Rwanda has also shown progress, Nijskens said, but the GOB continues to monitor developments. In Somalia, despite sending a frigate to the international mission to combat piracy, the Belgians have not been actively engaged in the root causes of the country's problems. However, the GOB now wishes to ramp up its involvement in the various fora discussing Somalia. Regarding Sudan, Belgian involvement has been exclusively on the Chadian side, contributing to peacekeeping with other European Union partners. Belgium has not had a presence in Zimbabwe for the last two years, since it closed its Embassy in protest of government repression. GOB officials recently met with Zimbabwe Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai in Brussels and expressed support humanitarian aid for

Zimbabweans, provided the Zanu-PF hardliners do not profit from it.

Belgium's Commitment to Central Africa

¶17. (C) Belgian business interests in Central Africa are insignificant, with the exception of some air links. When Belgian industry showed interest in investing in the port sector, all advances were rebuffed by the Congolese. In Nijskens' opinion, Africa is still important to Belgium, because Africa is an "internal domestic agenda," due to some 50,000 Congolese living in Belgium. When asked about China, Nijskens said that Belgium does not object to China's growing presence in the DRC and Africa. Nijskens sees China's business tactics as somewhat outdated, involving barter trade that encourages lack of transparency and exploitation. However, he feels that the Chinese now have a better understanding of the levels of corruption and are less inclined to try to "reinvent the wheel" than previously.

¶18. (C) Poloff reminded Nijskens of additional opportunities for Belgian participation. He reminded Nijskens that Africom would welcome Belgian participation in the Africa partnership station and the presence of a Belgian military liaison officer at Africom headquarters in Stuttgart.

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